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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Peter Schwarz
09.05.2020

Seventy-five years since the end of World War II in Europe

Seventy-five years ago today, the Second World War came to an end in Europe. In the early hours of 7 May, Colonel General Albert Jodl signed the unconditional capitulation of the Wehrmacht in Rhimes, France. In the face of the advancing Red Army, Adolf Hitler had committed suicide one week earlier in the Führer bunker in Berlin. All combat came to an end at midnight on 8 May 1945.

The Second World War was the most brutal and bloody conflict in human history. The crimes and cruelties that were perpetrated surpassed anything that humanity could have imagined in its worst nightmares.

Around 70 million people were killed, two thirds of whom were civilians: unarmed men, women and children. This was not collateral damage. The extermination of large sections of the population was the explicit goal declared by the Nazis' war of annihilation, which reached its bloody culmination in the murder of 6 million Jews.



Signing of the unconditional surrender on May 7, 1945 in Reims; General Jodl front left (Image: Musée de la reddition de Reims)

The Soviet Union alone lost 27 million citizens, of whom one half were civilians. Of the 13 million in uniform, 3.3 million froze or starved to death in German prisoner of war camps, which alone amounted to a monstrous war crime. Members of the Communist Party, Jews or partisans captured by the Germans were shot immediately. Whole districts were starved, burned to the ground and destroyed.

This murderous terror was not confined to the front lines. Alongside the Jews, who were carted off to Auschwitz from across Europe, hundreds of thousands of Sinti and Roma, members of other minorities, forced labourers and political prisoners lost their lives at the hands of the Nazis. Around 200,000 people with disabilities were killed as part of the euthanasia programme. German military courts convicted 1.5 million Wehrmacht soldiers for disrupting the war effort, including 30,000 who were sentenced to death. The victims of the civilian judicial system were never fully recorded. The People's Court of Justice alone issued 5,200 death sentences.

The Allies increasingly adapted their methods to those of their enemy. For the first time in modern warfare, both sides deliberately exterminated the civilian populations of large cities. The two-year-long siege of Leningrad by the Wehrmacht claimed more than 1 million lives. The Allies' firebombing of Dresden, Hamburg and other cities killed tens of thousands of civilians far from the front lines. In April 1945, US President Harry Truman signed the order to drop the atomic bomb on Japan in Potsdam, less than 30 kilometres from Hitler's Führer bunker.

The trauma, outrage and disgust provoked by the unspeakable crimes and cruelties committed during the Second World War deeply anchored the conviction among wide sections of the German and world population: "No more fascism! No more war!" But three quarters of a century after the end of the war, fascism and war are imminent global dangers once again.

These dangers existed long before the global COVID-19 pandemic, but the virus has rapidly accelerated them.

Concepts like "herd immunity" and "triage" have infiltrated daily language. They are part of the discussion of how many human lives should be sacrificed for "the economy," i.e., speculators on the share markets and the super-rich. In spite of urgent warnings from medical experts, millions of workers are being forced back to work. US President Donald

Trump has described Americans as “warriors” ready to give their lives for the greater good.

Wolfgang Schäuble, president of the federal parliament, stated that “it is not correct to say that the protection of life and health has unconditional priority over everything else.”

The threat of a third world war, which would mean the end of human civilisation, has never been so great as it is today.

The US president openly sympathises with fascist militias in the United States and right-wing dictators around the world, and is threatening Venezuela, Iran and even nuclear-armed China with war. He is supported in this by the opposition Democrats. The military spending of the Third Reich pales in comparison to the US defence budget, which this year amounts to \$738 billion. In 1938, the last year prior to the war, Hitler invested 17.5 billion marks in the army. In today's money, this equates to \$78 billion.

Germany, of all places, has become a hotbed for the rehabilitation of war and fascism. No other European country has increased its defence budget so rapidly. In 2019 alone it rose by 10 percent to almost \$50 billion. Germany overtook Britain in the process and now has the seventh largest defence budget in the world behind France.

The ruling elite's perspective was summed up by the Green Party's Joschka Fischer, who appealed to the Germans to use 8 May to “overcome their pacifism.” The country needs to “escape from its pacifist instincts,” he wrote in the *Tagesspiegel*. The approaching end of the “soft patronage” of the protective power of the United States is forcing “Europe to increasingly defend its own security.” That can “not work without Germany.” The weakening of American protection is posing “questions for Germany that others have answered for us since the spring of 1945.” In other words: back to the era prior to 1945!

The leader of the opposition in Germany's federal parliament and honorary chairman of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Alexander Gauland, described 8 May as a “day of absolute defeat,” when Germany lost its “agenda-setting ability.” He made these remarks in rejecting a petition initiated by Auschwitz survivor Esther Bejarano calling for 8 May to be made a national holiday. It comes in the wake of **Schäuble's description** of the year 1945 as a “catastrophe.”

Right-wing extremist professor Jörg Baberowski began the rehabilitation of the Nazis six years ago with his comment that Hitler was “not vicious.” He was defended by the university administration, the media and politicians, while the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP—Socialist Equality Party), which criticised him, was placed on the

Secret Service's list of anticonstitutional organisations. Baberowski was due to have given a keynote speech at the main commemoration of the end of the Second World War at the memorial in Torgau, Saxony. His appearance was prevented only by the coronavirus, which forced the cancellation of the event.

The overwhelming majority of the population in Germany and internationally opposes the return to militarism and fascism. But opposition is insufficient to prevent another catastrophe. It is necessary to have a clear understanding of their causes and a political perspective to fight them. The lessons drawn from the Second World War show that the struggle against fascism and war is inseparable from the struggle against capitalism. It requires the mobilisation of the international working class to fight for a socialist programme.

There are countless historical, sociological and literary works on the Nazis and the Second World War. But the extraction of the lessons from the plunge of human civilisation into barbarism collided immediately with powerful political and social interests.

The German elites continued their careers in big business, the government, intelligence services, judiciary, police, universities and the army after 1945 and had no interest in looking back. Hitler, whom they had served and embraced, suddenly was declared to have seduced and abused them. The Führer was to blame for everything, and they were all merely following orders, or were even secret resistance fighters. It took 18 years before the first trial was held of SS guards at Auschwitz, where over a million people were exterminated between 1940 and 1945.

The US government, which exposed the Nazis' crimes to the world in the Nuremberg Trials, rapidly changed course when it required Nazi experts in the Cold War. The trials were suspended after two dozen of the worst criminals were sentenced to death and about five times as many were handed prison sentences.

Although the Stalinist rulers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe pursued war criminals somewhat more actively, they had no interest in clarifying the historical questions. This would have inevitably revealed their own criminal role on the eve of the Second World War, when the Stalinist bureaucracy paralysed and suppressed the struggles of the mass Communist parties against fascism and war.

In Germany, the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) refused to call for a united front with the SPD (Social Democratic Party) against the Nazis, even though until 1932 both workers' parties were much stronger than the Nazis. In France and Spain, the Stalinists

subordinated the working class to popular fronts with the liberal bourgeoisie, persecuted and murdered revolutionary workers, and thus paved the way for the victory of reaction.

The writings of Leon Trotsky, who defended the heritage of Marxism and the Russian Revolution against the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union, still serve today as the most important source if one wishes to understand the Second World War and the Nazi dictatorship.

Trotsky insisted that the Second World War was triggered by the same causes as the First: the struggle between the major capitalist nation-states for global hegemony in an increasingly integrated world; the contradiction between the world economy and the nation-state system upon which capitalism is based; and the fundamental incompatibility of socialised productive forces with private ownership of the means of production.

Already in the summer of 1934, five years prior to the Second World War, Trotsky warned:

The same causes, inseparable from modern capitalism, that brought about the last imperialist war have now reached infinitely greater tension than in the middle of 1914. The fear of the consequences of a new war is the only factor that fetters the will of imperialism. But the efficacy of this brake is limited. The stress of inner contradictions pushes one country after another on the road to fascism, which, in its turn, cannot maintain power except by preparing international explosions. All governments fear war, but none of the governments has any freedom of choice. Without a proletarian revolution, a new world war is inevitable.

Hitler's personality influenced the course of events, but it was not the cause for the war. The real question to be asked was how it was that an anti-Semitic psychopath from the gutter of Vienna's backstreets rose to become leader of Germany. The answer is clear: the ruling elite needed Hitler and his fascist movement as a battering ram against the socialist strivings of the working class and to prepare a second imperialist war.

"This German epileptic with a calculating machine in his skull and unlimited power in his hands did not fall from the sky or come up out of hell: he is nothing but the personification of all the destructive forces of imperialism," wrote Trotsky of Hitler in 1940.

Britain and the United States did not wage a war to defend democracy against fascism, as they claimed, but rather for the imperialist redivision of the world.

The war resolved none of the problems that had provoked it. Based on the economic power of the United States and the politics of Stalinism, which suppressed the revolutionary movement of the working class and disarmed powerful resistance movements in France and Italy, a fragile truce emerged between the imperialist powers. In Eastern Europe, no socialist revolutions took place. The Stalinists in the so-called buffer states moved to impose widespread nationalisations only when the bourgeois elements developed an ever stronger orientation to the West. At the same time, they suppressed worker uprisings, including in East Germany in 1953 and in Hungary in 1956.

The mass strikes and student revolts that shook France, large parts of Europe and the United States between 1968 and 1975 prompted the ruling elite to launch a counteroffensive and deregulate the financial markets. The results were an unprecedented integration of global production and an intensification of the struggle for world hegemony.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not represent the end of socialism, but rather the collapse of the nationalist programme of the Stalinist bureaucracy. It heralded, as the International Committee of the Fourth International was the only political party to note at the time, a new stage in imperialist conflicts and a new era of wars and revolutions.

Thirty years later, the correctness of this analysis is beyond question. Global capitalism is steering towards another catastrophe, while the working class, which is much larger and more internationally connected than ever before, is being radicalised rapidly. The decisive question now posed is the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, the Socialist Equality parties, to give the struggles of the working class a socialist political orientation. Only the overthrow of capitalism can prevent a further catastrophe on the scale of the Second World War.

World Socialist 8 May 2020